Organization

Voiceless but empowered farmers in corporate supply chains: Contradictory imagery and instrumental approach to empowerment

Journal:	*Organization*
Manuscript ID	ORG-17-0022.R1
Manuscript Type:	Article
Keywords:	Food supply chain, Farmer, Critical discourse analysis, Emancipation, Oppression, Sustainability

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Recently there have been several calls for increased paradigm diversity in the field of sustainable supply chain management and for a shift of focus on the political and power-laden aspects of transitioning towards ecologically resilient and socially equitable global supply chains (Montabon et al., 2016; Matthews et al., 2016). This paper attempts to offer an empirically grounded response to these calls by examining issues of marginalisation and empowerment in global food supply chains from a critical realist stance. We seek to better understand the sustainability imaginary for smallholder farmers in the context of global supply chains and what this imaginary implies about underlying mechanisms of power and marginalisation. We adopt a multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the sustainability imaginary for smallholder farmers constructed by one large organisation, Unilever, in a series of videos designed, created and disseminated by Unilever on their own YouTube channel. We expose the underlying mechanisms at different levels and in doing so we interrogate how the dominant imaginary limits what is viewed as permissible, desirable and possible in the context of sustainability in global food supply chains.

Introduction

It is largely recognised that supply chains are fundamental to the transition to more ecologically resilient and socially equitable societies (Mohrman and Worley, 2010), and the question of how to transform them has been identified as one of the 'societal grand challenges' that management research should endeavour to tackle (George et al., 2016).

Interestingly, despite the need for large coordinated and collaborative efforts, the largest body of research in this area is concentrated in the insular field of sustainable supply chain management (SCM), a sub-field of operations management. Here the term insular is used in recognition of the way in which the field of sustainable SCM, despite its obvious interdisciplinary connections, has developed into a relatively paradigmatically homogeneous body of work, primarily adopting a rationalist and technological approach, self-restricting its exchanges and dialogues with other areas in organisational studies and social science more broadly. There have been calls for increased paradigm diversity in the field of sustainable supply chain management and for a shift of focus on, and engagement with the political and power-laden aspects of transitioning towards ecologically resilient and socially equitable global supply chains (Montabon et al., 2016; Matthews et al., 2016). In their critical article, Montabon et al (2016: 11) note that "the vast majority of research and practice regarding sustainable supply chains has followed an instrumental logic, which has led firms and supply chain managers to place economic interests ahead of environmental and social interests" and that this

"instrumental logic dominated by economics (…) is antithetical to humanity's well-being".

This paper attempts to offer an empirically grounded response to these calls by examining issues of marginalisation and empowerment in global food supply chains from a critical realist stance. Specifically, we recognise the need for a critical questioning of sustainability in corporate supply chains and for repositioning the debate within the realm of the political and social. Our view aligns with that of Blowfield and Frynas who argue that "by leaving unquestioned [sustainability]'s reliance on consensus and win-win outcomes, we leave the poor and marginalized exposed to the possibility of further exploitation and marginalization as a result of inequitable exertions of power" (2005: 513).

Global food supply chains not only exemplify supply chain capitalism but also the hegemony of the "giant corporation" (Tsing, 2009). Indeed, extended privately controlled food production and consumption networks have emerged through increased coordination of the global agricultural trade and increased global sourcing and contractualisation in search of efficiency (Young and Hobbs, 2002). These networks are controlled mainly by a relatively small number of Western large food retailers and manufacturers, a feature described as 'buyer-driven (-ness)' (Gereffi, 1994; Prieto-Carron, 2008). The consequences of such imbalanced power relations are immense for sustainability, in particular as these corporations have attempted to organise and govern

their supply chains through the imposition of standards and codes of conducts (Thompson and Scoones, 2009). In this way they have shaped the sustainability agenda according to restricted views of social justice and 'vested interests' in exploiting niche markets for differentiation purposes (Henson, 2006; Henson and Humphrey, 2010).

There have been few studies that have sought to explore the more political and social aspects of the sustainability question in global supply chains. Contributions by authors such as Prieto-Carron (2006; 2008), Loconto (2015), Barrientos, Tallontire and colleagues (2014; 2003; 2005) on women workers, corporate codes of conducts and global supply chains are noteworthy exceptions. Their works draw on the feminist literature to unveil (limits to) processes of emancipation and empowerment and to critically assess the limited impact of corporate social and environmental initiatives. Our contribution in this article adds to this perspective by considering farmers (i.e. agricultural raw materials suppliers) as marginalised subjects in global food supply chains. We seek to better understand the sustainability imaginary for smallholder farmers in the context of global supply chains and what this imaginary implies about underlying mechanisms of power and marginalisation.

We adopt multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the construction of the sustainability imaginary for farmers by one large organisation, Unilever, in a series of videos designed, created and disseminated by Unilever on their own YouTube channel. Drawing on the complete population of videos published by Unilever between

2011 and 2016 that mention and pictorially represent farmers, we seek to investigate the portrayals of marginalised voices and identify the sustainability imaginary constructed around farmers in the food supply chain context. We are particularly interested in exposing the underlying mechanisms of power and marginalisation in the context of transitioning to sustainability in supply chains and in interrogating how the dominant imaginary limits what is viewed as permissible, desirable and possible in this context.

Framing and contextualising

Narratives and images of sustainability: marginalised voices

The predominance of the large firm perspective in research is very symptomatic of what is happening in practice, with multinational corporations often being held accountable for the sustainability of their suppliers and also promoted as the main agents of change to drive sustainability (Amaeshi et al., 2008; Crespin-Mazet and Dontenwill, 2012). Assuming the central role given to large firms in defining the sustainability agenda, then it is critical to understand how they frame the meaning of sustainability through narratives and images.

Research that has considered the notions of power and legitimisation through discursive practice has uncovered how actors may use discourse, as text or images, as weapons in dialectical battle (Hardy and Phillips, 2004). Authors have also discussed how discourse analysis enables analysing power struggles at play between various actors in their

attempts to assert the legitimacy of narratives and meaning construction around organisational issues (Vaara and Tienari, 2008; Barros, 2014). This also implies that there is a possibility to explore which are the dominant discourses and the dissonant ones, the dominant voices and the marginalised ones.

There has been some interesting research in the field of sustainability that has considered narratives and images for instance in the context of large companies trying to assert their legitimacy on sustainability issues (Barros, 2014) or in assessing the role of CSR reports in camouflaging real sustainable development issues (Boiral, 2013). There is however a dearth of contributions that have sought to explore discursive practices around sustainability in supply chains. Considering the underlying structural power dynamics at play in such contexts (Touboulic et al., 2014), one can expect to shed light on legitimisation, resistance and marginalisation practices between buyers and suppliers by specifically considering the construction of discourses as interrelated to material practices.

Work that has considered more covert power dynamics around sustainability, which are observable through inter-related material and discursive practices, is particularly interesting for our research. A stream of research on gender and global value chains (Prieto-Carron, 2006; Prieto-Carron, 2008; Barrientos, 2014; Barrientos et al., 2003; Tallontire et al., 2005) highlights how the governance structures of global value chains, rooted in imbalanced power relations, influence the social practices developed and

implemented by actors in this context. They particularly critique codes of conduct, standards and certification in that they reproduce these imbalanced power structures (i.e. increase dependency) and actually fail to deliver the goals they are set out to achieve (i.e. increased labour right and gender equality). This is because they do not address deeply embedded structures of inequality, particularly with regards to the gendered division of labour in global production (i.e. women occupying the more precarious positions) (Prieto-Carron, 2008).

Another relevant example can be found in the work by Nelson and Tallontire (2014) that explores the interrelated material and ideational powers at work in the shaping and implementation of social and environmental standards in global value chains. They show how the dominant and powerful narrative of "global sourcing" (i.e. put forth by multinational companies and which focuses on security of supply) influences, and is associated with the development of certain practices to the exclusion of others. They also challenge the ability of the approaches rooted in this dominant discourse to effectively "transform agriculture to sustain livelihoods for workers and smallholders in equitable and sustainable ways" (Nelson and Tallontire, 2014: 495).

Unilever: the giant corporation as discourse shaper

Following from the view that global food supply chains exemplify supply chain capitalism and giant corporations and that the sustainability question in this context

cannot be detached from these structural characteristics, we have chosen to focus our analysis on one of these giant corporations that has substantially shaped the discourse and actions on sustainability in food supply chains. In order to place the discourse in an appropriate context we provide some background on our chosen company, Unilever, as well as on the discourse itself (Pollach, 2003).

Unilever is a multinational consumer good company that had a turnover of €52.7 billion in 2016. A self-proclaimed 'force for good' (Unilever, 2015), the Anglo-Dutch company has "ambitious plans for sustainable growth and an intense sense of social purpose" (Unilever, 2017). Unilever is often lauded by others also as an industry leader, solidified by being named as such 15 times in 16 years on the Dow Jones Sustainability Index (DJSI). With 2.5 billion people using their products daily (Unilever, 2017) and 58% of their business in emerging markets Unilever has a far reach. The current CEO of Unilever, Paul Polman, is known for his views on responsible profit making and long-term orientation (Ruddick, 2016) key principles for social responsibility implementation (Epstein and Roy, 2001). Given the dedication to equality Unilever are self-identified (Burn-Callander, 2015), and externally recognised (DJSI, Behind the Brands, CDP) as impactful in the sustainability space. For example, Oxfam in their Behind the Brands initiative (Oxfam, 2016) have consistently ranked Unilever as first or second out of the top 10 biggest food companies across seven sustainability indicators. Oxfam also

reports a consistent rise in Unilever's overall sustainability score between 2013 and 2016, as illustrated in the Figure below.

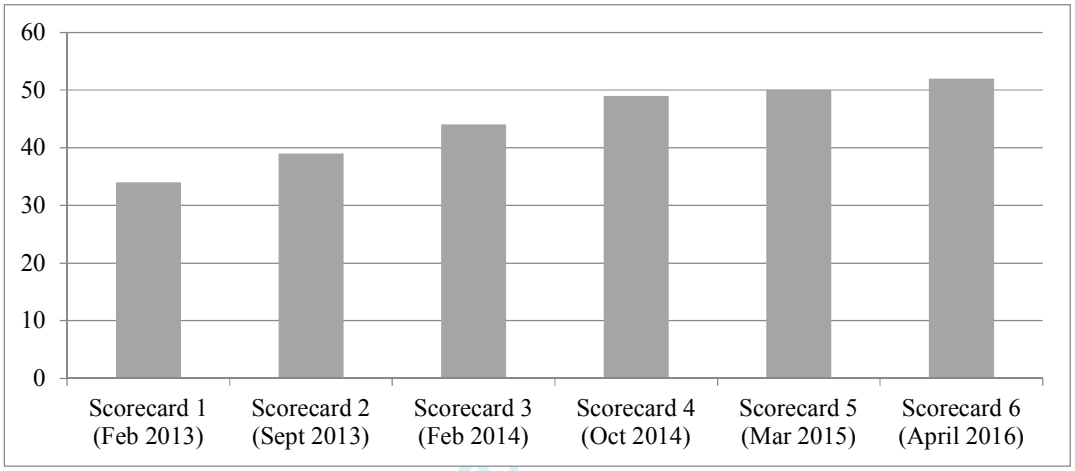

Figure 1. Oxfam Behind the Brand company scorecards: Unilever overall scores

A closer look at the specific scores on the seven different issues assessed by Oxfam show that Unilever's performance in relation to the categories "farmers", "women" and "workers" that are relevant to this work, has been reported as either consistently fair/good or improving. This notable exception is around "women", which remains comparatively low to the others issues. This is illustrated in Figure 2.

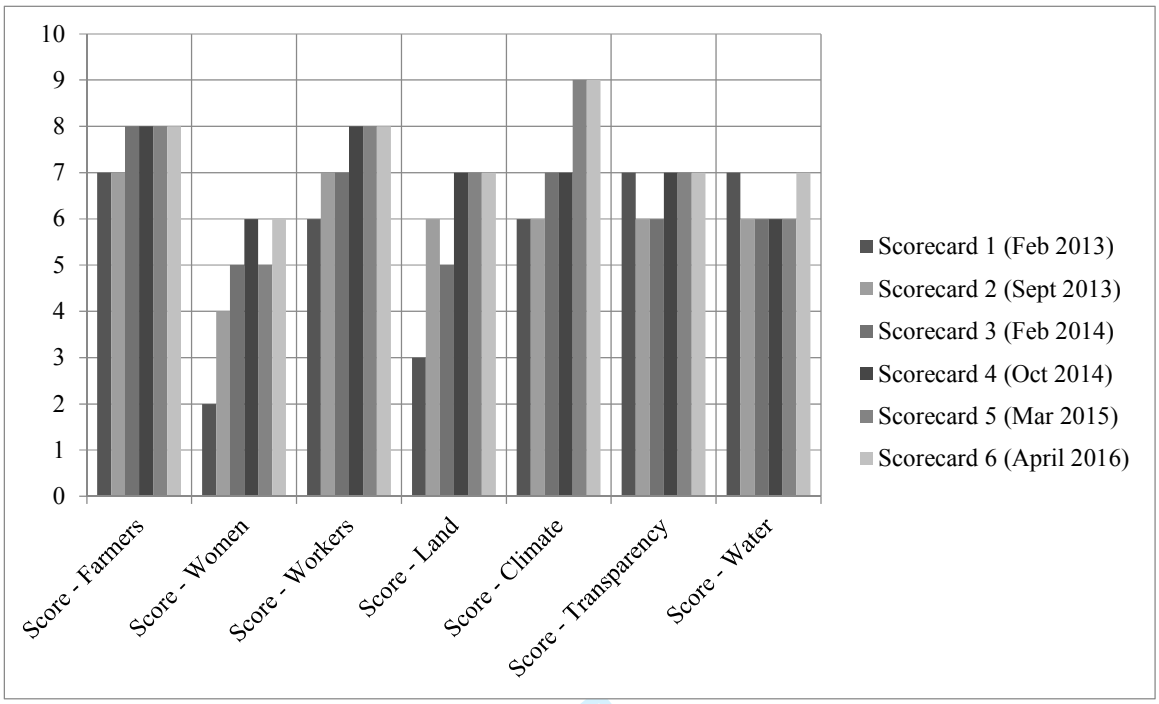

Figure 2 - Oxfam Behind the Brands: Unilever's scores on sustainability issues

At this stage it is important to point out that Oxfam's approach to assessing the companies' performance on these issues is solely based on the analysis of publicly available information disclosed by the companies themselves, and "the Scorecard does not directly assess actual conditions on farms and whether the policies of the Big 10 are implemented and enforced" (Oxfam, 2013: 6). This is indicative of the difficulty of reporting impartial data and of measuring the actual impact of practices implemented by such large corporations. It also substantiates Unilever as a powerful discourse-maker. They can be seen as shaping the discourse and narrative around sustainability in the

sphere of large corporations. Unilever are explicitly involved in meaning making as the producers of these media under consideration (Fairclough, 2003).

Methodology

The field of discourse analysis is particularly well established in organisation studies (Grant et al., 2004) however its applications in the field of sustainable SCM remain scarce, almost inexistent, notably because of the paradigmatic homogeneity described earlier. In simple terms, the core tenet of discourse analysis is to understand how text, visuals and other forms of linguistic are shaped and in turn shape broader social relations. There has been much interest in how discourse through text and visuals is constructed by actors and used as a way to make sense of certain issues and legitimate responses or practices in relation to this issue, for e.g. gender relations at work (Barros, 2014; Vaara and Tienari, 2008). More recent contributions have highlighted the need to broaden the domain of discourse analysis by considering broader social practices and the value of linking discourse and materiality through realist approaches (Phillips and Oswick, 2012; Reed, 2004). CDA has been identified as particularly useful in this regard because of its multilevel analytical orientation and its focus on both text and context (Phillips and Oswick, 2012).

A realist approach to CDA

Discourse theory states that we cannot understand social interaction without understanding discourse, defined as the collection of statements that makes the world meaningful to social agents (Fairclough, 1992). As it is through the process of meaning making that the world is made real for us, it is claimed that discourse has social constitutive effects (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). Discourse constructs what is possible for social agents to be and do by legitimising which identities, ideas and activities are acceptable and which are not (Foucault, 2002; Phillips and Hardy, 2002). It does this through the construction of the subject positions social agents inhabit and the concepts they use to understand the world (Phillips et al., 2008).

The social agents we are interested in here are the giant corporation (Unilever) and the farmers that supply them and it is considered that interactions between the two will be largely 'discourse-led' (Fairclough, 2009). In order to understand how the two work together to effect change we need to understand the discursive practices within which such efforts are enacted and how these interrelate with wider social practices. A key discursive practice within this process is the development and enactment of imaginaries for change, which are visions of how the world could or ought to be (Fairclough, 2009). Such imaginaries shape "people's sense of what is permissible, desirable and possible. They create and institutionalize a proper and meaningful world. The signification of progress simultaneously binds together our diverse activities of production and consumption and gives them directions" (Wright et al., 2013: 649). In other words,

imaginaries create coherent boundaries and orientation for actors to collectively imagine and enact solutions to highly complex issues (Levy and Spicer, 2013; Wright et al., 2013).

CDA is characterised as a methodology rather than a method as it is grounded in a number of philosophical and theoretical assumptions (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). Specifically, it is based on the meta-theoretical assumption that social interactions cannot be understood fully without reference to the discursive practices in which social agents are engaged (Fairclough, 2003; Wood and Kroger, 2000). It is a method in which the researcher grounds the analysis in the texts and a key concern is to use concepts constructed within the discourse rather than a priori concepts constructed within academic discourse (Wood and Kroger, 2000).

A strong case has been made for the incorporation of CDA into a realist approach, in order to avoid a reductionist approach to discourse in organisation studies and instead embrace the 'relational' character of discourses in their interaction with social structures and practices (Fairclough, 2005). Critical realism suggests several levels of analysis. Within the level of the 'actual' we have processes and events that are caused by the social structures that exist at the level of the 'real'. The relations of causality are highly complex between the levels of the 'real' and 'actual' and are mediated by social practices. Discourse is an important element of social practices, both of which are relatively stable. Texts are part of processes and events and draw upon discourses in

their production (Sims-Schouten et al., 2007; Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 2010; Fairclough, 2005). At the level of the 'empirical' the structures and the processes of the real and the actual are experienced and made sense of by individuals.

A realist approach to CDA enables exploring the experiences at the level of the empirical contained in the primary data and relating them to broader social practices through processes of retroduction (Fletcher, 2017), which consist in a back-and-forth between the empirical data, other sources of data, literature and theory (Leca and Naccache, 2006). It is through this iterative process that underlying mechanisms can be exposed and we can explore the domain of the real. Fleetwood (2005) suggests that there are four aspects of the real: material, ideal, artefactual and social. Our analysis concerns two levels of the real: the ideally and socially real; and the relationships between them. Discourses that constitute imaginaries are ideally real as they have 'causal efficacy', i.e. an influence on behaviour and actions, and include the following entities: ''language, genres, tropes, styles, signs, symbols and semiotized entities, ideas, beliefs, meanings, understandings, explanations, opinions, concepts, representations, models, theories and so on'' (Fleetwood, 2005: 200). They are socially real as they concerns social practices and social structures.

Analysis

Our approach to CDA in this study is therefore intrinsically multi-dimensional, exploring discursive practices, their underlying generative mechanisms and extra-discursive contexts (Sims-Schouten et al., 2007). We nonetheless followed Wood and Kroger's (2000) proposed two staged approach to analysis. The first is a sensitising stage in which the analyst familiarises themselves with the data. The second stage is the formal analysis and in this case concerns the sustainability imaginary for farmers within Unilever's videos.

Having agreed on the search criteria we initially returned 32 videos containing the term farmer on the Unilever YouTube channel. We deliberately excluded any videos which did not contain imagery or rhetoric around farmers and were left with an agreed sample of 22 videos that had been created and published on the site from 2011-2016 (see Table 1).

We utilised a multimodal discourse analysis (as illustrated in Table 3) as it allows for the incorporation of other forms of resources in the discourse analysis. Extending in this instance beyond the text, to the audio, imagery and gestures, this approach allows us to explore multiple meanings (O'Halloran, 2011). The multimodal analysis here includes the interactions between the spoken language, the written language, imagery and gestures. This approach allows understanding of *intersemiosis*, the 'relations arising from the interaction of semiotic choices' (Jewitt, 2009). We use this to explore the interactions, relationships and contradictions between text, imagery and audio

representations in order to begin to unpack the narratives and counter narratives being simultaneously presented. The analysis of these multiple modes facilitates a richer deeper understanding of the discourse as it shifts between different resources presented in the empirical data.

Working in isolation, each researcher undertook a multimodal CDA, coding each of the 22 videos thematically. This constituted our open coding process where we took note of the context (e.g. imagery surrounding the farmers but also how we, the consumer/audience, are positioned relative to the farmer) as well as the content (discourse design and it's fitness for purpose), which was presented. We then met to discuss our codes, refining and collapsing as we progressed. Returning for a final analysis of the videos some new terms emerged and some codes were collapsed and others dismissed. Through constant comparison techniques and interpretive analysis of these established codes, we established relationships between codes.

Table 1. Videos analysed in the study

	Title of video	Who features?	Supply chain	Publication	Views pre-study (November 2016)	Link to video
V1	Knorr Farmer Summit 2015	Unilever ,farmers and suppliers and key partners	Knorr food supply chain	Unilever 07/10/2015	301	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aKsNzT84Jpo&t=85s
V2	Christine, a vanilla farmer from Madagascar	Vanilla Farmers, Symrise	Vanilla	Unilever 02/02/2015	210	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31--UrvxzNk&t=10s
V3	Building a bright future for our smallholder farmers	Elizabeth, Kenya, accountant for unilever Unilever and GAIN (the global alliance for improved nutrition) and Marcatus QED	Tea	Unilever 28/10/2015	4043	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WfzXz8kjM7Y
V4	Sustainable tea farming	Lipton Rainforest alliance, smallholder farmers	Tea	Unilever 25/05/2012	1954	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fi-pC6kCvhk
V5	Working with smallholder farmers	Unilever	Tea	Unilever 15/04/2014	1884	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_531USGMYE
V6	Kenya tea development agency	Kenyan Tea Development Agency, Lipton, Unilever, KTTI and DFID	Tea	Unilever 02/02/2015	380	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OdntnangIdM
V7	Empowering women through sustainable agriculture	Women farmers, Unilever employees. Bharathi Associates	Gherkins	Unilever 19/10/2015	1092	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Rsy6_srJww
V8	Sunrise – Bringing together Sustainable Sourcing and Development	Sunrise (a 5 year programme of work between Unilever and Oxfam) – speakers from Oxfam and Unilever and	Sourcing / procurement strategies	Unilever 23/01/2015	153	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lNb9zrf7ZaE

		Universities				
V9	More Vanilla – Great Ice-cream	Images of vanilla producers.	Vanilla	Unilever 01/05/2015	3607	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixnaqYfi3dg
V10	The value of empowering women	Unilever / women in their various roles	Role of women in VC	Unilever 24/04/2015	2923	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PWt1cjt_x7I&index=1&list=PLncvI6F_uW_pY0Gl34AV9jgNRcERZJ6KW
V11	Unilever: Empowering Women	Unilever/women/consumers	Role of women in VC	Unilever 02/07/2015	12426	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O71k6-_59rQ&list=PLncvI6F_uW_pY0Gl34AV9jgNRcERZJ6KW&index=8
V12	Feeding the farmers that feed you	Unilever / consumers	Tea, Cocoa, vanilla, sugar, nuts	Unilever 30/08/2011	2348	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=14V_dryoK-c&index=1&list=PLncvI6F_uW_oAosEwqCttPybKTAFl26WF
V13	Sustainable Vegetables	Unilever, farmers, chefs	Vegetables (tomatoes)	Unilever 24/04/2012	4651	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=anyw3Shcino&index=2&list=PLncvI6F_uW_oAosEwqCttPybKTAFl26WF
V14	Sustainable Sourcing	Knorr, knorr products, farmers, machinery	Vegetables	Unilever 16/04/2013	18864	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-eSJKNXsvwI&index=4&list=PLncvI6F_uW_oAosEwqCttPybKTAFl26WF
V15	Vanilla sourcing in Madagascar	Vanilla farmers, Unilever, Symrise, GIZ	Vanilla	Unilever 28/01/2014	3225	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHOE5dVTQW4&list=PLncvI6F_uW_oAosEwqCttPybKTAFl26WF&index=6
V16	Barry Callebaut	Barry Callebut employees	Cocoa	Unilever 02/02/2015	1343	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ld6BLTAfG4&index=8&list=PLncvI6F_uW_oAosEwqCttPybKTAFl26WF
V17	The Morning Star Packing Company: Unilever sustainable sourcing with our suppliers	The Morning Star Packing Company	Tomatoes	Unilever 02/02/2015	1645	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pjjkF6HYSws&list=PLncvI6F_uW_oAosEwqCttPybKTAFl26WF&index=10
V18	Unilever and sustainable palm oil	Unilever	Palm oil	Unilever 02/02/2015	468	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j1aZRDwZQbU&list=PLncvI6F_uW_oAosEwq

						CttPybKTAFl26WF&index=11
V19	Local sustainable tomato sourcing helps smallholder farmers and grows the brand	Kisser, Unilever, Indian businesswoman, Manisha Shashikant (Varun Argo Processing Foods)	Tomatoes	Unilever 29/05/2015	2104	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ll5rEN-bS58&index=14&list=PLncvI6F_uW_oAosEwqCttPybKTAFl26WF
V20	Winner announced of the first HRH The Prince of Wales Young Sustainability Entrepreneur Prize	Projects in Mexico, Nigeria, Guatemala, Nepal , Peru, India	Focused on supporting households in developing markets (waste, water, feed, electricity, crops, education)	Unilever 02/02/2015	155	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bQwgxT15LFA
V21	2015/2016 Finalists: Unilever Young Entrepreneur Awards	Young entrepreneurs working in Pakistan, Nepal, Ignitia, Colombia, Cambodia, Guatemala and Belize, Nigeria	Health care, weather for yields, plastics, cacao supply chain, casava	Unilever 17/05/2016	720	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Kos2tpr0ug
V22	Certification vs Self Verification	Unilever, Fair Trade, Rain Forest Alliance	General SC	Unilever 02/02/2015	826	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xYsyReVvZks

Findings

This section will present Unilever's sustainability imaginary for the smallholder farmers within its supply chains. The central concept used to understand Unilever's sustainability imaginary is 'empowerment'. It is shown that Unilever have constructed an instrumental concept of empowerment. This empowerment allows farmers to achieve Unilever's commercial goals, principally securing supply within their agricultural supply chains. While in instances this improves the socio-economic conditions of the farmers within Unilever's agricultural supply chains, the farmers' dependence upon Unilever is increased. The videos communicate the feasibility of Unilever's sustainability imaginary through the processes of hyper-reality and reality crafting. Hyper-reality (Garland et al., 2013) is evidenced in the luminosity and vividness of the images within the videos.

This section draws on the videos as our principal source of empirical material and is structured around two interrelated pillars, evidenced through practices, narrative and imagery, that together form the sustainability imaginary of the empowered smallholder farmers. These pillars are essentially overarching themes from our analysis (more detailed map of codes in Appendix 1), namely the construction of sustainability and empowerment and the construction of subject positions, and are used to structure the remainder of this findings section

Construction of sustainability and empowerment strategies

Sustainability

Unilever adopts an instrumental concept of sustainability based on win-win logic. They adopt a problematising strategy and problematise issues that can they help solve (Maguire and Hardy, 2009). Sustainability is a key concept within Unilever's discourse but despite this, is never explicitly defined. Instead, Unilever's concept of sustainability is constructed through a series of goals (e.g. "*source 100% of our materials sustainably by 2020"* V1), practices (e.g. *"nutrition programme"* V7, funding programmes to acquire technology such as *"humidity probes"* V13) and imagery (knowledge sharing for sustainable farming as illustrated through images in e.g. V1 "*Knorr Farmer Summit 2015"*). These practices also relate to the central organising concept of empowerment.

This results in the sustainability discourse in the videos becoming a discourse around sustainable farming, which is itself not explicitly defined but can be made sense of from the recurring issues that Unilever refers to and the practices discussed in the videos. There is a lack of clarity of the centrality of these issues to the farmers with Unilever's issues identification centred on yield improvement, quality, agricultural training, access to finance and the market. For example, in V14 on sustainable sourcing the narrator, representing Knorr, explains: "*over the years we have worked with farmers to help them reduce their costs and increase their yields*" (0:55 -0:58). In V7, Mr Vinod identified as

an owner and partner, discusses sustainable irrigation in the form of drip irrigation, which is according to him "*very important for gherkins*" and has resulted in "*the yield for farmers to increase by 20/25%"* over two years since it has been implemented. In V2 there are specific references to the topics and practices rolled out to Vanilla farmers in Madagascar; these are "*water protection*", "*farming without chemicals*", "*no littering*" and "*changing the farmers' approach to washing*".

Throughout the videos a recurring idea is that farmers need guidance and aid in order to create and export sustainable products for consumers. The outcomes of these 'aid' programmes are presented in the context of what is beneficial for the consumers. There is narrative around the need to educate the suppliers and bring them up to speed with sustainability. The training and education theme is evident in the textual and spoken discourse as well as in the images used. In V5, V6 and V7 for instance there are not only verbal references to training ("*Since 2011 we have helped to train 18,000 tea smallholders to prepare them for Rainforest Alliance certification*" V5, 0:30 - 0:33) but also images of the training being delivered in situ as shown in Figure 3. Some of the imagery used tends to be reminiscent of the colonial period.

Figure 3. Farmers being trained and education in V7 and V6: colonial representations?

Training and education are also more subtly conveyed in V1 for example, where Unilever is portrayed as occupying a facilitator role in developing and sustaining knowledge exchange and learning between different stakeholders. The stakeholders featuring in the video include several managers from Unilever, a pig farmer and several suppliers (e.g. Transa and Ardo).

Related to the theme of farmer training and education are the ideas of quality and yield. A low yield can be problematised and held up for Unilever to help fix. In V5 Unilever's refreshment product category manager discusses tea farming in Turkey and says: *"Among the many ways that we are helping to improve tea farming includes teaching farmers to reduce their fertiliser use and increase their yields. And this improves their soil. It saves them money and helps them earn more."* Statements like this one are common in the videos and simplify the linkages between complex issues such as yields and soil quality, and reduction in costs, savings and earnings. Another example is the simplified relationship between sustainability, yields and quality. In V1 a Unilever

manager explains how *"a healthy crop is a crop that comes from sustainable farming and a healthy crop will give you better yields and better taste"*.

Quality improvement is problematised rather than poor quality, as quality is a core issue in terms of the consumer and while improvement is acceptable, framing a product as low quality may be unacceptable. There is clear evidence of consumer centricity prevalent here and the quality product is the critical link between production and consumption. Throughout the videos, there are images conveying the high quality of the products through the use of bright colours, high definition and close-ups (Figure 4).

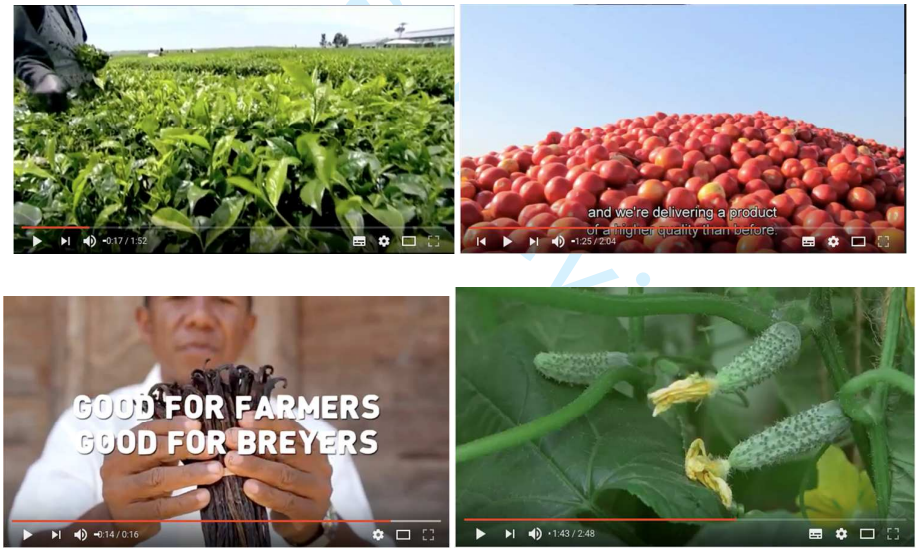

Figure 4. High quality products: vivid images from V4, V7, V9 and V13

This is also illustrated in verbal/textual evidence. In V13 both farmer and Knorr chef talk about quality in relation to the product/ingredient:

> *"Sustainability is imported in our farm because we have exceed our production limits and we are delivering a product of higher quality than ever before"* (Farmer, V13)
>
> *"We know that ingredients are better when we take care of them"* (Knorr chef, V13).

In V16, the Chief Innovation Officer for Barry Callebaut, which supplies chocolate for Unilever products such as Magnum, explains:

> *"The second thing we're doing together in sustainability is making sure that the quality of the cocoa improves and if that does improve then cocoa farmers will make a better livelihood and will stay in cocoa farming and will have better livelihoods for their families as well and I think that helps all of us in terms of sustainability."*

The problematised issues of quality and yields improvement already signal the dependence structure at play in the global supply chains in which Unilever is involved. In particular, in linking the enhancement of the farmers' livelihoods to yields and quality improvement, the responsibility for this enhancement is therefore attributed to the farmers themselves. The quote above from manager at Barry Callebaut does highlight that the conditions for the improvement of the farmers' livelihoods are rooted in quality improvement ("*and if that does improve then cocoa farmers will make a better livelihood").* Similarly, in V4 Unilever's Refreshment Category manager declares

"Farmers are incentivised and will get more money if they produce good, high quality tea".

Empowerment

As with the concept of sustainability, empowerment is not defined by Unilever and is likewise constructed through a bewildering series of targets ("*we aim to empower 5 million women across our value chain"* V10) and practices (empowerment through *"agricultural training",* V7). The concept of empowerment is constructed as a means to various ends. These ends are poverty reduction, gender equality and improved supply chain performance.

Unilever appear to be crafting a new definition of empowerment that is distinct from definitions of the concept based on the principles of self-determination and self-efficacy (Rappaport, 1995; Conger and Kanungo, 1988), and focussed on the empowerment of farmers to achieve Unilever's aims. While nebulous as a concept, the ends for which empowerment is a means are concretely defined as quantifiable targets. These ends can be classified at two levels: social ends at the level of society and economic ends at the level of the supply chain. At the social level, Unilever seeks to contribute towards high-level goals such as poverty reduction, gender equality. Videos such as V10, V11, V20 and V21 provide some indication of the larger societal issues that are occurring at a global level, however the focus remains on delivering value for the business and is hence instrumental. In V10 for example the question of gender inequality is addressed

but empowerment of women is framed around constructing them as the lead decision-makers for consumption in the family *("Women reinvest 90% of their income back into their families while men reinvest only 30-40%").* V20 and V21 are focused on young entrepreneurs and the activities they engage in to support communities to have more sustainable livelihoods. There the direct link with Unilever is implicit when the entrepreneurs talk about how their projects affect communities that find themselves in specific supply chains (e.g. cocoa).

At the economic level, as discussed previously Unilever seeks to improve supply chain performance through improving the quality of the farmers' produce and increasing the yields produced. Empowerment is the means to achieve all of these goals and includes the following practices: decision making, skill acquisition through access to training and the promotion of rights. Interestingly empowerment as constructed by Unilever seems to blur the lines between work and family, business and private spheres and particularly in the case of women.

This empowerment allows farmers to achieve Unilever's commercial goals, principally securing supply within their agricultural supply chains. In one video Elizabeth, a Unilever account from Kenya speaks to the video which focuses heavily on training an educating farmers and particularly females on fundamentals such as nutrition and hygiene. The nutritional element takes the form of information and practical instruction in on growing your own garden, they hygiene is focused around basic sanitisation: *"it's*

simple...if a farmer and their family is healthy and sick less often it means they really can reach their full potential. They can live a wholesome and productive life and go on to nurture the next generation of happy and healthy farmers. So it's a bright future for Unilever and the farmers, everyone wins" (V3). Decision-making is often related to health. In V7 and V10, there is a mention of how women make decisions regarding the nutrition of their family and are therefore core to the business in maintaining *"healthy communities",* which can then achieve their full potential as farmers.

Empowerment is the principal order of discourse upon which Unilever draws to construct its sustainability strategy and produces two subject positions, those of the empowerers and empowered. This will be further explored in the following sub-section.

Construction of subject positions

The videos present both the perspectives of the 'empowerer' (Unilever) and the 'empowered' farmers and these perspectives are unpacked in this section. We show how actually Unilever very much constructs the perspective of the farmers for them through the editing of the videos. There are nonetheless some indications that the full picture is much more complex. The main group that has been identified by Unilever as beneficiaries of their empowerment is women.

The 'empowerer': self-construction of Unilever and its partners

The ‘empowerers’ are high-level actors working for Unilever and its supplier and NGO partners, including executives, heads of programmes, University employees and trainers. The videos are unsurprisingly Unilever-centric, yet the way in which their omnipotence and ownership over the issues and people is conveyed is at times uncomfortable. Examples of this include the very title of some of the videos such as ‘Building a bright future for **our** smallholder farmers’ (V3) or ‘Unilever: Empowering women’ (11) that convey this sense of ownership and power but also the top-down direction of these initiatives. The ‘empowered’ (smallholder farmers and agricultural workers) are most of the time referred to only relative to Unilever e.g. ‘Knorr farmer’.

Interestingly the external actors are often framed between the Unilever actors and are often the same sustainability ‘persona’ we have seen previously. In V8 for instance there are several Unilever personas and external partners - in this case Oxfam and Universities - being interviewed to discuss the implementation of the ‘Sunrise’ programme. The interviewees, all white middle-aged male figures, have names and positions but not all of them have an affiliation, which serves to blur the boundaries between Unilever and its external partners. This is a recurring feature in other videos, where for instance large suppliers such as Symrise (V2 and V15) or Barry Callebaut (V16), are interviewed or talked about with no introduction of who they actually are and what role they play in the supply chain.

There is a business-centrism prevalent in Unilever's self-designed image. Business-centrism is particularly salient in videos that clearly link Unilever's brands to sustainability issues. For example in Figure 4, the bottom-left picture clearly states '*Good for farmers, Good for Breyers'*. In V4, it is explained that it made sense for Unilever to play a role in sustainable tea farming because of their leading position in the market through their Lipton brand. Overall, there is an element of transcendent magnanimity in their self-described role as a 'force for good' (Unilever, 2015).

Business-centrism also permeates the role that Unilever constructs for itself and its partners, and the way in which empowerment is constructed as a means to improve supply chain performance. In Unilever's discourse, the unnamed structures are those of the globalised economy in general and those of globalised agricultural production in particular. Despite being unnamed, they are somehow represented in the persona of the 'trader' who acts as an intermediary between the farmers and the 'market'. The trader abuses this position to drive down the price that farmers are able to get for their crops (V2). Unilever and its partners are working to emancipate its farmers from the traders through a purported process of disintermediation in which the farmers get direct access to the market. In reality, Unilever is replacing the intermediary of the trader with its own suppliers. In contrast to the shadowy figure of the exploitative trader, Unilever's chosen intermediaries are constructed as agents of empowerment. Traders are actually never visually represented in the videos and only mentioned in passing for their

exploitative practices: *"Farmers very often depend on traders that allow them only a very small income"* (V7).

The commercial relationship between the farmers and Unilever's own intermediaries are not stated except to indicate that the farmers in occasions may receive a higher price, providing they fulfil requirements in terms of quality, and other advantages such as training. It is not clear what type of contract the farmers have with Unilever's intermediaries and the level of dependence that these contracts create. Unsurprisingly, the farmers shown in the videos are grateful recipients of Unilever's benevolence. There are hints however from the farmers in several videos that the situation is not as ideal as Unilever would like to portray it, which we discuss further in the following sub-section.

The 'empowered' farmer

In this section, we will look at the individual smallholder farmers, and their families and communities that are represented within the videos. We look at how they are represented in the videos as being empowered and how they experience their empowerment empirically. Specifically, the analysis will focus on the empowered farmer in general and the empowered female farmer in particular and how they empirically experience empowerment.

Unilever produces a myriad of positive farmer images to communicate the feasibility of its empowerment strategy, focusing on groups and using illustrative personal examples.

Some of the imagery used tends to be reminiscent of the colonial period. The representations tend toward the idealised, with farmers appearing to be at one with their agrarian communities and the agricultural landscapes that envelop these. There is a tendency toward a caricature-like representation of the 'happy' farmers, which is often supported with over-enthusiasm in speech or body language e.g. unfaltering constant smiling farmers (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Images from V4: The happy farmer?

The source of the happiness is generally dependant on the quality of their product, which in turn appears to mirror quality of life. Interestingly, the fact that this framing of happiness around farming is reductionist is highlighted in one of the videos where Christine, a vanilla farmer, is interviewed and asks whether the interviewer is asking about what makes her happy in relation to vanilla or in general (V2). In general the videos often depict the source of happiness also as somewhat location dependent, there is an overarching theme of pride or happiness in product coupled with love over

financial motivation in the Western context, differencing from the financial motivation plus glimpses of pride in the non-Western context.

Evidence exists of how these representations are crafted and the use of editing in the videos provide multiple representations of the same farmer e.g. 'Christine the Vanilla farmer' is presented in four videos, V2, V5, V9 (briefly) and V15 illustrating the different metaphors of the empowered female and the empowered farmer. A related example of reality crafting in the videos is the constant representations of the close proximity of supplier and Unilever (and their chefs). Here while crafting a caring façade, where the chefs choose the farmers produce due to its high quality much to the farmers delight, the focus is really on consumers, sustaining a Unilever centric view. This farmer's delight is well illustrated with the following quotes *"A healthy pig is a happy farmer"* (Michel Schoneveld, pig farmer: V1) and "*Any farmer that knows his produces are going to be consumed all over the world, with the quality we create, well, would feel really proud. A farmer* ***can't*** *ask for anything more than that"* (Antonio Tienza, Knorr Farmer: V13). The natural tendency is to highlight central achievements 'with' farmers.

There is a suggestion within the videos that some of the farmers may not be as happy as they appear and that some the farmers' livelihoods are unsustainable, which in turn raises questions about the feasibility of Unilever's sustainability imaginary. There are hints that the incomes that the farmers' are getting may not be enough to support them.

One female gherkin farmer mentions that she is in need of finance and "*wants a better life*" (V7). Another example of this is Christine, a vanilla farmer from Madagascar and a leader within her community. She expresses two desires that problematise the imaginary presented. First, while acknowledging the good work that Unilever and its supplier Symrise have done for her community, she believes that more needs to be done.

> *"I'm asking to keep getting support…I'm asking this to Symrise on behalf of the whole group and not just me. They're already doing a lot but we need more help"* (V2).

Christine appears to be adopting the position of a supplicant here, which undermines the idea of empowerment. Second, she states that she does not want her children to become vanilla farmers and instead wants them to become doctors. There are also clear indications that the videos are being edited to mask the harsh realities that the farmers are facing. In several of the videos there are subtitles to convey what the farmers, often female, are saying. In an attempt to explore whether the subtitles did justice to what was actually being said, we obtained a professional translation for V2 from Malagasy to English. Some of the most problematic excerpts are presented in Table 2, showing how the editing of the videos serves Unilever's own purposes in a process of decontextualisation.

Table 2. Evidence of decontextualisation through editing of subtitles

Video	V2: Christine, a vanilla farmer from Madagascar (Unilever, 02/02/2015)	
Question posed by interviewer	What challenges do you face?	What are your aspirations for the future?
Subtitles provided by Unilever	**We don't really have a problem** with vanilla farming. After flowering and pollination, there is the problem of theft. We have to work together as a community to protect the farms. That's the problem with vanilla.	My aspirations for the future are that the price of vanilla will increase Apart from the price of vanilla, my aspirations are **that people will continue to work with Symrise** because it improves our **livelihoods.**
Translation of what is being said	**The problems we have here concerning vanilla there are that many about the work**, but after it has finished flowering it and there are pods, there are still some thieves while there is ripe vanilla. **So we have difficulties as a community watching out, we don't sleep from dusk until dawn looking after our ripening vanilla, so that it won't be stolen.** So those are our problems still here concerning vanilla.	**What I hope for.... just concerning vanilla**, I still hope now that the price of vanilla keeps rising. **That there will still be a good market for it, and then the income for us in the countryside will come.** Our hope is, we like to hope.... **The vanilla, I'd like it to be expensive to buy, and after that I hope that we can trust in working together with Symrise,** I can see that that helps improve our **life** here.

Empowerment and gender. The main group that has been identified by Unilever as beneficiaries of their empowerment is women. Again, an instrumental logic is adopted in which Unilever targets women, as it is believed that their empowerment will help Unilever to achieve its higher-level sustainability goal of poverty reduction, which is itself part of the development necessary for Unilever to achieve its commercial goals.

Women have little agency in the processes of empowerment being described. Instead, the processes 'empowering' women are constructed, initiated and managed by Unilever and its partners (suppliers and NGOs).

The video on gherkin production in India (V7) uses a number of buzzwords related to empowerment such as increasing the role of women in decision-making. Given the relationship between Unilever and these women is borne out of their position as a supplier, it is interesting that Unilever choose to empower them first in terms of familial institutions (e.g. women appear to be making decisions relating to nutrition i.e. shopping and cooking) and laterally financially (in terms of borrowing), rather than in terms of the agrarian purpose upon which the relationship is constructed and which both parties expertise is focused. While this practice may help Unilever contribute towards the development goal of improving nutrition, it seems an unlikely mechanism of empowerment to fundamentally change their roles within their families and their communities. Indeed, it seems to fix them in their reproductive positions of wives and mothers rather than self-determining subjects and in productive work.

Gendered representations feature strongly in the videos within and across contexts. Women are represented as generally 'western' or 'non-western', the western women being presented as a customer, an empowering consumer or a white-collar worker when presented as an employee. This provides stark contrast to the typically black farming woman. They are presented as having commonality in terms of their desire to look after

family and the community. Their role as a (black) farmer/ (white) consumer is regularly juxtaposed with that of a cook/consumer provider of familial nutrition. Males and females in the farmer context are also represented differently. As noted the role of the female farmer is generally presented to us in terms of becoming the active decision makers but in terms of the family not the business (e.g. V7, V10, V11).

In the male roles, the power is dynamic and changes in relation to women but also relative to other males. This is particularly obvious in terms of hierarchy and reinforced in the Western and non-Western divides. In this context the role of dress and imagery is very important. This is reinforced in the contrasting images of those shown farming and those at the farming summit (V1). They are also often discussed by those in more senior and less land-orientated positions (V2, V16, V17, V18). Often the clothing can be depicted on a westernised continuum, which reflects the hierarchy congruently, higher roles and status being reflected in the more westernised dress. There is a related construction evidenced in the females represented also, those who work in the farms appear in traditional dress, they often use pink buckets and generally are re-positioned inside the home at some point during most videos (V3).

In V7 the imagery and rhetoric is around improving farmers livelihoods and particularly female farmers yet the images that show training taking place centres around a male trainer (identifiable by his Unilever western polo shirt) and two male farmers (traditional dress, ergo clearly farm workers). To compound this both males who speak

get names and roles assigned to them. Females do get names and locations except for the singular female farmer whose literal voice is heard and is focused on finance, debt and survival.

Figure 6. Images from video 7 – Women workers, Men trainers

Table 3 below shows how the multimodal CDA was conducted using the example of V7. This illustrates how elements such as the total time individuals speak, the visual and kinetic features and the spoken and written speech all contribute to perpetrating traditional gendered roles between male and female protagonists. There is an irony to the consistent condescending manner in Unilever's male representatives' discourse around 'voice-giving' to women.

Table 3. Multimodal analysis of Video 7 'Empowering women through sustainable agriculture' (Unilever Youtube video, published on 19 October 2015)

Theme(s)	Women, voice and empowerment, sustainable agriculture, training			
Supply chain	Gherkin			
Protagonists in video	11 people featuring in the video - * indicates those who speak - * Boris Rafalski, Procurement director Sustainable sourcing (*speaks 1min 30 sec in total)* - A woman wearing an orange top, picking gherkins, nameless - Two women cooking in two separate kitchens, one grinding cereals/spices and the other making bread, nameless - Three men in the gherkin field: one wearing a purple Unilever polo-shirt (appears to be a trainer), two men listening (appear to be farmers), nameless - Two women picking gherkins, nameless - * Mr. G.M. Vinod, Owner and Partner, Barakhi Associates, Barnataka *(speaks 34 sec in total)* - * Mrs Radamma, Hassan, Kanataka - shown picking gherkins throughout the video *(speaks 26 sec in total)*			
Frames				
Minute	0:18	0:30	0:43	2:17
Visual and kinetic aspects				
Landscape/context	Gherkin plants cover the background, vivid green colour	Gherkin plants on both sides of the frame, vivid green colour	Inside house, possibly kitchen, table, pestle mortar	Gherkin plants cover the background, vivid green leaves and yellow flowers
People's appearance	Boris wearing a dark shirt	Woman wearing bright coloured clothes, head covered and holding a bucket	Woman wearing dark clothes, head uncovered	Mrs Radamma wearing shirt - work clothes, head uncovered when she speaks

People's actions	Boris standing in the field, speaking in English	Woman picking gherkins, repetitive movement, walking through the field	Woman grinding cereals/spices in a repetitive movement	Mrs Radamma standing in the field, speaking in her native language and alternatively picking gherkins
Postures and gestures	Boris standing fairly still, looking directly at the camera	Woman, slightly bended, picking with one hand, holding bucket in other, not looking at the camera	Woman kneeling on the floor, using a her hands for grinding, not looking at the camera	Mrs Radamma standing fairly still, looking directly at the camera
Speech				
Who is speaking?	Boris Rafalski	Boris Rafalski	Boris Rafalski	Mrs Radamma
What is said?	"Women play a key role in agriculture, we want to focus on women in our programs"	"It's important to give women a voice and to empower them to take a more active part in the decision-making that is affecting the entire family"	"For our nutrition program women are key because women are the ones that take the lead in this in deciding on nutrition for their family and therefore we want to empower them through the training we are doing"	"We want to work to earn money, we can survive if we do this. We have a women's association in the village. From that we take loans and we repay them in instalments"
Text	Name and position of Boris Rafalski	-	-	Subtitles for translating what Mrs Radamma says
Themes	Women's role and place, agriculture	Women, voice and empowerment, family	Women, nutrition, feeding family, empowerment, decision	Work, finance/earnings, survival, loans/debt

Discussion

In our findings we have unpacked the sustainability imaginary for farmers in supply chains constructed by Unilever. In this section, we explore in more depth what our findings suggest about underlying mechanisms of power and marginalisation for this group, drawing on additional resources and the literature to explore the context outside what is portrayed in the videos. We are particularly interested in what is absent from the videos and imagery in trying to unveil underlying structures. We expose the underlying mechanisms at different levels and in doing so we interrogate how the dominant imaginary limits what is viewed as permissible, desirable and possible in the context of sustainability in global food supply chains.

Macro-level: Inequalities and trickle-down economics

To understand a discourse we have to understand what is absent as well as what is present (Wood and Kroger, 2000). The macro level of the political economy and the globalised system of agricultural production are not explicitly referred to within the videos. These have to go unnamed as naming them would reveal the exploitative social relations that these structures have created and call into question Unilever's claims about the sustainability of its supply chain strategies. While sustainability is referred to constantly, sustainable development is not.

Unilever's discourse lacks a political-economic context but it would appear that the system of neo-liberal globalisation is unquestioned. The decontextualisation of the farmers' poverty is necessary for Unilever's sustainability strategy to be constructed as a solution. While the farmers from emerging markets are growing cash crops to be consumed by Unilever's richer customers, many of the farmers and their families presented in the videos are struggling with their own nutrition. Discourse is reflecting the shift from a predominantly agrarian focused society in the Western world.

This certainly corroborates research on global value chains (GVC) (Gereffi, 1994; Barrientos et al., 2016) that has highlighted the importance of taking into account governance structures, in terms of power relations, of such chains and the institutional contexts in which they are embedded at local, national and international levels. It has been recognised that global "outsourcing was facilitated by trade and financial liberalization initiated in the 1970s and 1980s, and driven by intense competitive pressures for cost reduction" and that it "has led to the creation of new architectures for the organization of production, trade and consumption in the global economy" (Barrientos et al., 2016: 1214). In particular, the idea that value chains in various sectors, and food in particular, have become governed around the interests of a few large players, such as retailers and manufacturers, has received much attention (Gibbon, 2003; Palpacuer et al., 2005; Thompson and Scoones, 2009). Tregear and colleagues (2016: 436) explain how as a result of the dynamics of GVCs "small-scale suppliers in

the global agro-food sector become excluded or marginalised from value chains, as they become 'captured', or transactionally dependent on larger, more powerful buyers"

These underlying GVC dynamics are not present in the videos, yet research has argued that these have often resulted in a 'race to the bottom' in many industries (Bair, 2005; Appelbaum, 2008). A significant body of work has also emerged questioning the effectiveness of private and market-driven sustainability initiatives, primarily in the forms of standards, in driving real change for those most affected (i.e. farmers and workers upstream) (Loconto, 2015; Tallontire et al., 2005; Prieto-Carron, 2008). These initiatives are essentially part of the governance of GVCs and come to actually reinforce already existing stringent conditions imposed by dominant buyers over their suppliers, such as "meeting high production standards, accepting falling competitive market prices, and working to tight 'just-in-time' production schedules" (Barrientos et al., 2003: 1522). Interestingly, in many of the videos these strict requirements do transpire and particularly around the concept of quality, which is a core dimension to Unilever's farming sustainability discourse. This is where the instrumentalism of the sustainability imaginary constructed by Unilever takes its full meaning.

Meso-level: Supply chain capitalism and inter-organisational dependence

Unilever's approach to sustainability appears to be more consistent with the neo-liberal imaginary of 'trickle-down economics' than sustainable development with emerging

market farmers getting marginal improvements in their incomes through closer integration into Unilever's supply chain.

Our findings suggest some interesting paradoxical rhetoric and representations. The levels of farmer involvement and accompanying importance vary along the lower end of co-designing a sustainability agenda. We are seeing 'normalisation' of the discourse around these farmers and how this has come to be an accepted institutional practice. The rhetoric around farmers builds on other rhetoric of power imbalance, knowledge and imperialism, but presents this as unproblematic and beneficial for all (Maguire and Hardy, 2009). This may considered to be indicative of a synecdoche of larger world issues and inequalities.

In contrast to the assumptions put forth by Unilever, there is undeniable evidence that price premiums, e.g. in terms of vanilla, are at a minimum and other representations, e.g. not addressing issues of death and debt, which are presented by general trends and media reporting are not being presented by Unilever. There is actually evidence in the news that the situation is rather dire in some of the contexts depicted as fairly idyllic by Unilever. For example, vanilla farmers in Madagascar have been facing very volatile markets for their vanilla over recent years, and have suffered greatly in the face of unpredictable weather patterns that damage their crops (Griffiths and Ghouri, 2016). In the same article published in the Guardian in 2016, a vanilla farmer Francis Falihari is interviewed and mentions how 'it is impossible to survive from growing vanilla alone if

you are small farmers like us' and he blames the large companies for having a detrimental role that forces farmers to change their practices and prematurely cut their crops in order for supply to be secured (Griffiths and Ghouri, 2016).

This process of using natural capital within developing economies to support overconsumption in developed economies is antithetical to the idea of sustainable development. Interestingly, the motivation for Unilever's sustainability strategy appears to be continuity of supply, i.e. securing the continued overconsumption in developed economies, rather than sustainable development, which would require a fundamental change to the relationship between the developed and developing economies. Clearly this cannot be acknowledged, as Unilever's business model is dependent on this exploitative relation. Our findings therefore echo previous research (Nelson and Tallontire, 2014) that has shown that the dominant narrative related to sustainability standards, the 'Global Sourcing' narrative, is rooted in the vested interests of multinational companies in securing supply and preventing reputational risks. Nelson and Tallontire are critical of the extent to which this narrative has become so uncontested and call for the need to search for narratives that have enough ideational power to "successfully challenge prevailing current dominant narratives and processes of agro-industrial globalization and engage in and win the battle of ideas for alternative approaches which transform agriculture to sustain livelihoods for workers and

smallholders in equitable and sustainable ways that respect their rights and agency" (2014: 495).

We may conjecture that Unilever tends toward a relative view of the farmer in terms that their existence is generally discussed in terms resilience and benefit for Unilever and Unilever's future as well as their customers, the existence of the company being conceptualised as dependent on the latter. The farmers themselves appear to have little prominence, centrality or voice and may be subject to reification. They are contributing and reinforcing institutional normative relativism centred on the organisation as the key player and the moral relativity that is attached to that. We note the prevalence of a sense of benevolence and righteousness on the part of Unilever.

The more traditional and operational aspects of SCM, such as contracts and pricing, are absent from the videos, which actually signals that these are significant underlying mechanisms in shaping the social relations and practices represented in the videos. As noted in previous research on inter-organisational networks and relationships (Vincent, 2005; Touboulic et al., 2014), the outcomes of such exchanges and who they benefit cannot be fully grasped without a consideration for the resource dependency, and therefore the power relations, between the different parties. It is possible to infer that the representations of farmers' compliance to Unilever's sustainability agenda and the actual solutions and initiatives implemented by Unilever in their supply chain are

therefore considerably determined by the imbalanced dependency that exists between Unilever and the farmers.

Micro level: Instrumental empowerment and the absence of voice and agency

Although farmers have not become de-realised as victims, much of their singular identity has been lost and their voices are being subsumed (Butler, 2009). The validity of their speech, the institutional knowledge they may have is being threatened and their voices are being de-legitimatised. Question of silencing them normatively and managing the 'consumer/viewers' expectations to the point where we no longer expect their voices to be heard as experts or farmers but as part of the production process.

Perhaps it is worth reflecting here upon the use of the word empowerment. Empowerment is defined as a "mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their affairs" (Rappaport, 1987: 122). The concept of empowerment however is closely connected to other concepts such as liberation, freedom and emancipation, which strongly emphasise agency. Feminism was traditionally concerned within women's 'liberation' and using such a term raises the question of 'liberation from what?' (Thomas and Davies, 2005). Emancipation is the "process through which individuals and groups become freed from repressive social and ideological conditions, in particular those that place socially unnecessary restrictions upon the development and articulation of human consciousness" (Alvesson and

Willmott, 1992: 432). Freedom can be defined as "the state which allows the person to remove himself (sic) from those dominating situations that make him simply a reacting object" (Blauner, 1964: 16).

In our analysis, the supplier voice on sustainability is being marginalised through impersonal and patronising representations. Yet their representations are framed within the discourse of empowerment. Specifically this can be related to the representation of the role of women in GVCs, further demonstrating them in their traditional reproductive roles. The construction of the female farmer subject position in Unilever's imaginary reproduces the "structural and relational constraints (…) that limit women's voices and participation" (Loconto, 2015: 194) and hence they "fail to deal with deeply embedded structures of inequality, such as low wages and the segmentation of women into the lowest paid and more insecure jobs" (Prieto-Carron, 2008: 13)

The concept of empowerment raises the question "for what purpose are the farmers being empowered?" The response to this question that we can get from the representations communicated through the videos is a rather instrumental view of empowerment. Specifically, it appears that individual farmers are being "empowered" for the sole purpose of ensuring the sustainability of Unilever's supply chains. Certainly there is a paradoxical sense of objectification and alienation of the farmers; a removal of their agency.

The possibilities for real emancipation for the farmers requires considering them as subjects and giving them a voice because "emancipation is not a gift bestowed on people" (Huault et al., 2014: 25). Two pertinent questions can therefore be posed: (1) How may farmers remove themselves from this dominating situation where they are made reacting objects? (2) Given a voice how would the farmers envision themselves outside a destiny of continuous exploitation? These questions could be the fruitful basis for future research where an attempt is made at "letting the people speak for themselves" (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992: 111)

Conclusion

This article is an attempt to engage with the social and political aspects of sustainable SCM, which has so tended to treat the transition to more ecologically resilient and social equitable supply chains as a technological and rational problem.

Our analysis of Unilever's sustainability imaginary for smallholder farmers is a first step towards understanding the way in which the dominant discourse creates limitations in terms of what is possible and imaginable for the broader sustainability agenda in supply chains dominated by large corporations. Utilising processes of decontextualisation, through which underlying structures are removed, is a way to construct corporation-led instrumental subject positions of empowered farmers for sustainability in supply chains. This imaginary is symptomatic of the dynamics of

GVCs and has become increasingly uncontested which is problematic. The lack of alternative imaginaries restricts what we conceive as possible solutions and enslaves us to a single exploitative vision for sustainability. The videos are accounts of what initiatives are imposed to the farmers rather than how they truly experience them. Unilever through their editing of the videos are editing the supply chain, sustainability and the notion of empowerment.

The scope of this study enables exploring the construction of the dominant sustainability imaginary and unveiling the underlying dynamics of the marginalisation of farmers around sustainability in corporate supply chains. However, our interrogation around power and marginalisation has highlighted the need to explore possibilities for real emancipation. We suggest that much more empirical evidence is needed to extend our understanding of what real emancipation would entail when placing marginalised groups in supply chains such as farmers as subjects. This in line with a view of emancipation that asserts equality rather than assumes that in order to be emancipated the marginalised need to be enlightened about their condition (Huault et al., 2014).

We envision that such research endeavours would actively seek to give voice to the marginalised. We contend that researchers have an active role to play in supporting the realisation of such emancipation. Methodologies such as participatory approaches can help put the interests and concerns of marginalised stakeholders at the heart of the research process (Tallontire et al., 2005; Reason and Heron, 1986; Reason and Torbet,

2001) We follow Rappaport in suggesting that as researchers "perhaps we will also learn to listen to the voice of the people with whom we work so as to allow them to tell us what it means to be empowered in their particular context. The narrative approach suggests new ways to become more sensitive to such voices" (Rappaport, 1995: 798-799).

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APPENDIX 1 - Code map